

IX

ORDER OF THE ALPHABET OR "ABC" AND NUMERAL VALUE OF LETTERS

THE order of our modern alphabet in the "ABC" is that of the Roman alphabet of the later empire, which was based upon that of the Cadmean Phœnician of the Pre-Roman rulers in Italy, the Etruscans, who, we have seen, were a colony of Lydians from Asia Minor who were Phœnicians or kinsmen of the Phœnicians. And through the imperial policy and prestige of the Romans this order of the alphabet became generally current throughout Europe.

The earliest-known alphabetic lists or "abecedaria" have been found in Etruscan settlements in Italy, scribbled as school-exercises on a child's ink-bottle, on vases or drinking-cups or other treasured articles buried in children's or other owners' tombs. The oldest of these is on a vase bearing also an Etruscan inscription of the owner from a tomb at Formello, near the ancient Etruscan city of Veii, about ten miles north of Rome, and dated from the archaic type of the letters to between the sixth and seventh century B.C.,¹ though it may be earlier.

Significantly the letters are of the Cadmean non-reversed Phœnician kind, and are 26 in number as seen in Fig. I (p. 57), where their equivalents in modern letters are placed underneath.

It gives the order generally as in the late Greek alphabet—four letters following the T, which is the last letter in the

¹ TA. 2 73-78.

restricted "Semitic" Phœnician of 22 letters, but the \bar{O} or Omega, the late concluding letter of the Greek version is omitted. The third letter from the end is represented by an upright or semi-sloping cross +, and represents undoubtedly the X of the Greek, the letter to which Greek scholars give the value of *Ch* as we have seen. On the other hand, the 15th letter which occupies the identical place of the X or *Xi* of Greek scholars, and which we have seen represents the three-barred S of the Phœnician, is here given the unusual form of three semi-upright bars twice crossed, which, however, seems more like an S than an X, and approaches in form the correspondingly placed squarish *Samekh* S of the Hebrew. The last two letters are *Ph* or *W* and the sign read in the Runes variously as *X*, *A* and *I*, but by Greek scholars as *Ps*.

ΑΒ<DEFIΘΒΙΚΛΜΝΞΟΡΜϞΑΒΖΤΥΑΦΨ

A B G D E F Z H Th I K L M N Xi (or S) O P S' Q R S T U X Ph (or W) Ps

FIG. 1.—The Formello Alphabet of about seventh century B.C.

This shows that the Early Cadmean Phœnician alphabet existed about the seventh century B.C. in substantially the same serial order as in the present-day alphabet, allowing for the dropping of the obsolete letters *S*, *S'* and *Th*, and the transference of *Z* to the end place by the Romans, when they displaced it from its seventh place or station to make room for *G* which they displaced from its original place third in the list into which they foisted their new form of *G* as *C*.

These changes in the old order of the letters are shown in the accompanying table, in which the letters of the first three columns are given their modern letter values.

The familiar order of the letters in our alphabet or ABC appears to be, not as is generally supposed a merely capricious or accidental collocation of the letters, but a scientific arrangement of the letters according to their sounds. It was long ago noticed that in the Phœnician, Greek and Latin

ORDER OF THE ALPHABET, ANCIENT AND MODERN

Cadmean Formello.		Phœnician "Semitic."	Greek.	Roman.
1.	A	A	A Alpha	A
2.	B	B	B Beta	B
3.	G	G	G Gamma	C
4.	D	D	D Delta	D
5.	E	E	E Epsilon	E
6.	F	U, Y, V, F	(F)	F
7.	Z	Z	Z Zeta	G
8.	H	H, Kh.	H (Ē) Eta	H
9.	Th	Th	Th Theta	—
10.	I	I	I I-ota	I
11.	K	K	K Kappa	K
12.	L	L	L Lambda	L
13.	M	M	M Mu	M
14.	N	N	N Nu	N
15.	Xi or S	S	Xi Xi	—
16.	O	O	O O-micron	O
17.	P	P	P Pi	P
18.	Sh	Š	—	—
19.	Q	Q	—	Q
20.	R	R	R Rho	R
21.	S	Sh	S Sigma	S
22.	T	T	T Tau	T
23.	U	—	U Upsilon	U, V, W
24.	X (+)	—	X Chi	X
25.	Ph (W)	—	Ph Phi	Y
26.	Ps (A, I, X)	—	Ps Psi	Z
			Ō O-mega	

or Roman alphabets there is a repeated sequence of the letters as vowels, labials, gutturals and dentals. This sequence is well displayed by Professor Petrie, in arranging the letters on a square table like the old "Horn-book" board for teaching children their ABC. This arrangement is

seen in Fig. 2 with the necessary modifications in view of the new evidence for the antiquity of the letters U, W, X and Z.

This appears to indicate that originally the letters were arranged for learners in perpendicular rows, according to

	Vowels.	Labials.	Gutturals.	Dentals.	Nasals, etc.
Formello, Cadmean Phœnician.	A	B	G	D	
	E	F	ZH	Th	
	I	.	K	.	LMNXS
	O	PS ^h	QRST		
	U	.	X(^{Ph} B)		
Semitic Phœnician.	A	B	G	D	
	E	F ^W	ZH	Th	
	I	.	K	.	LMNS
	O	PS	QRSIT		
Roman.	A	B	C	D	
	E	F	GH	.	
	I	.	K	.	LMN
	O	P	QRST		
	U ^W	W	XY	Z	

FIG. 2.—Scientific order of the Alphabet Letters
(As on a "Horn-book" board).

their phonetic class qualities, and that later on they were read transversely across the board, which gave them the apparently capricious and irregular order in the modern alphabet. The old letters, the sibilant S and the liquid

R were presumably too few to form separate groups. The position of the R immediately after the Q suggests that the sound of that letter was guttural—the guttural R. The concluding letter Z, the sibilant, appears to have been perhaps regarded by the Romans as a dental, and significantly the Z sign is often rendered by the dental *D* by Egyptologists¹ and *Tch* by others.²

This fixed alphabetic order was, no doubt, conduced to by the early practice of giving numeral values to the letters according to their relative position in the alphabet, thus A = 1, B = 2 and so on; and this practice was adopted from the Phœnicians along with the Sumerian letters by the Semites, as seen, for instance, in the order of the books of the Old Testament, and especially in the 119th Psalm. Here it is noteworthy that the Sumerian *Ā* sign possessed the value of "One"³ in the Sumerian, long anterior to the formation of the Cadmean and "Semitic" Phœnician alphabets; and similarly *Ā* had also this numeral value in Egyptian.⁴ But none of the other Sumerian signs which are disclosed to be the parents of the alphabetic letters appear to have possessed numeral values in Sumerian except a very few, and these are not according to their "Phœnician" values, thus I = 5 and U = 10.⁵

¹ GH. xi.

² BD. 893 f.

³ See *Dict.* (WSAD.), and Br. 6542, 6549. It presumably derived this value as a contraction for *Āś*, "one" or "ace," but it is given the equivalency of the Water-sign *Ā*, i.e., the source of the letter A.

⁴ See *Dict.* (WSAD.), and BD. 105a; and it is by the same Hand-sign as in the Sumerian.

⁵ Br. 12,192, 8677.